

Pakistani Secondary School Teachers' perspective of Meaning of Work

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study indicates the perspective of Pakistani secondary school teachers on the meaning and importance of work in their lives. The data was collected through in-depth recorded semi-structured interviews from 17 secondary school teachers and were analysed using narrative analysis. After a two-stage coding, the themes that developed included the economic meaning of work, psychological meaning of work, changes that make work more meaningful and reasons why working has lost its meaning. Findings indicated that work is an innate character of humans and it's the source of satisfaction. Still, if parents become part of the system, more teaching resources and techniques applied, teacher opinion given importance would give more meaning to teachers' work. When management is not supportive, teachers face disrespect and do not get due appraisals, or a salary increase made teachers' meaning of work lost. In this way, this research facilitates the educational administration and leaders to understand the teachers and their needs which would help them appreciate the teachers properly and provide them with the incentives they deserve. It would also enhance the quality of teachers' work and the quality of education. It is found that the teachers would work more enthusiastically if their opinions were given importance.



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INTRODUCTION

Human beings have evolved through several biological and social evolution stages from hunters and gatherers to today's corporate world ([Abric, 2008](#)). In this corporate society working is the same as having a job, and people work for others without direct control over the organisation's aims and objectives. People are given a specific task to perform for which they get paid; that is where an individual is caught between the manager's role and motivations. For decades social scientists have been trying to give other dimensions to work than the economic factors. Therefore, recently, there has been a shift towards more individual-centred research regarding the integration of work in an individual's life ([Boeskens et al., 2020](#)). It is generally termed "meaning of Work" or "giving a meaning to the work and its place". Teaching is one of the suitable professions for women in Pakistan. It is preferred over any other profession due to lesser working hours, lesser interaction with the opposite gender and easy accessibility to the schools ([Lewis & Sheppard, 2006](#)).

Moreover, there is no prerequisite qualification for adopting this profession in Pakistan; thus, women quickly opt for it. Most of the teachers in Pakistan are by chance and not by choice. Similarly, teaching for men is not a very likable profession, so the male teachers, especially at the school level, are in the minority. Hence, finding out about the meaning of work for the teachers would indicate the causes and solutions of the problems arising from the situation. Meaning of work has been identified as explaining the essential indicators of the motivation behind any professional duty ([Gill, 1999](#)). Hence, finding out about the motivational factors would lead to recommendations for improvement in the environmental factors. Likewise, this research attempts to explain the meaning of work for teachers. Hence it explores what it means for teachers to teach or what motivates them to come to classrooms. The research in this area would help identify the distinctive and usual factors altering the level of motivation for secondary school teachers in the Pakistani context. The results from this research would be beneficial in reviewing both the internal and external changes required in the school system for achieving progressive outcomes. It would be helpful for the teachers to reflect upon their practices through making meanings of their motivation. Similarly, the responses from the teachers would be beneficial for the administrators in future decision-making.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Humans, being the social creatures, not only find working a part of their economic need; but it also fulfills their social and psychological needs. [Harpaz and Fu \(2002\)](#) explain that work can provide self-esteem and social interaction and identity their status. Social Psychology gives importance to the psychological factors to the meaning of work, and it provides the individual's psychological needs closely linked to social, ethical, and cultural values. Social Psychology gives importance to the psychological factors to the meaning of work, and it provides the individual's psychological needs closely linked to social, ethical, and cultural values. On the other hand, sociology emphasises the individual's social identity and self-worth. Whereas, [Pignault and Houssemann \(2021\)](#), in their research, to confirm the Morin's Scale ([Morin, 2003](#)), validate the contribution of success and recognition, the usefulness of work, respect dimension of work, the value from and through work, and remuneration as contributing factors in defining the meaning of work for people.

Teachers are an essential part of any society, and the meaning of work for the teachers requires research. Teachers have an essential function of educating society, making it possible to have different work motives other than the economic function. The need to investigate the meaning of work for the teachers is crucial to understanding their motivation and what keeps them working despite mostly underpaid jobs. [Tirri \(2019\)](#) describes that a purposeful teacher has a long-term moral commitment to teaching that is meaningful personally and benefits students, colleagues

and society. There have been minimal studies on this topic worldwide, especially in the Pakistani secondary school context, that emphasise the protective role of meaningful work, even though it may impact the well-being of the employees (Clauss et al., 2020). Thus, this research investigated the meaning of the work and its value for secondary school teachers in Pakistan.

People have a different view of meaningful work, and they give different values to intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Beadle & Knight, 2012). Researchers have defined meaningful work in different ways. The meaningfulness of work can be defined as the degree of energy worth spending on demands by the work (Korotkov, 1998). Quintanilla and Wilpert (1991) defined work meaning as teachers' perception about their work, their needs and their expectations from work. This meaning of work forms a component of society by influencing the individual's actions and the society's nature. Wresniewski et al. (2003) defined the meaning of work as the understanding, and the worth of the work performed by the people as work doesn't only have the economic factors attached to it. Numerous studies show work has no meaning other than earning a living. In their study, Morse and Weiss (1955) showed that work is also a means to avoid boredom, have a sense of achievement, and place in society.

Similarly, Kuusisto and Tirri (2021), in an attempt to find purposeful teachers in their community, identified hedonistic factors as one of the primary reasons behind the meaning of a teacher's work. Meaningful work is about the described work and role and how people adjust and adapt their lives according to the work culture and environment (Chalofsky & Cavallaro, 2013). Analysis of the same term from a different perspective, as given by Minkkinen et al. (2020), the meaningfulness of work infuses life among the workers; thus, it is fundamental to find the true meanings of work. Chalofsky and Krishna (2009) further elaborate that the meaning of work depends on its purpose, values, and work relationships that develop during the work life. Organisational and Social Psychology has a deep interest in knowing what makes and shapes the feelings and behaviours of the people in different working groups and cultures. There has been a lot of interest in this field during the decade. Does the meaning of work remain the same or change constantly? According to Harpaz and Fu (2002), in a dynamic organisation, the meaning of work changes rapidly and constantly for people. One of the main reasons for this is people's socialisation, the introduction of new technologies, and the enhanced quality of the work (Quintanilla & Wilpert, 1991). Efforts have been underway to understand and study these changes, which can predict the behaviour of the employees and the possible consequences. According to Brief (2003), these studies and discussions on the changes in the meaning of work will help us understand the value of work in an individual's life and determine how it varies and rises. Therefore, there have been different attempts at operationalising the meaning of life, and researchers have taken a keen interest in exploring the different aspects of work. The sense of meaningfulness has been linked with positive outcomes of employees (Hu & Hirsh, 2017).

The research related to the meaning of work includes the functions of work (Morse & Weiss, 1955), the structure of the work and its meanings (Andersson, 1992), the analysis of word meanings (Gill, 1999), the changing structure and the environment of the workplace (England, 1991; Harpaz & Fu, 2002), and the meaning of work in various cultures (Snir & Harpaz, 2006). It also involves investigating the social interactions that shape the meaning of work (Teurlings, 2008) and the relationship constructed between the factors of the meaning of work and its effect on an individual's mental health and the workplace. (Morin, 2008).

Researchers have argued that the meaning of work changes from country to country, and it also depends on ideological factors as well. For example, the researchers have found that the former soviet workers emphasised social aspects and contributions to the meaning of work as it aligns with the socialist ideology (England et al., 1995). Nevertheless, Kuchinke et al. (2009) found that the workers in Poland and Germany had a stronger preference to work even if they didn't need

to work for a living than the Russians. Chalofsky and Cavallaro (2013) raised the more important question: should we take meaningful work in isolation or be part of a meaningful life? A meaningful workplace contributes to meaningful work and a psychologically safe environment (Steenkamp & Basson, 2013). In a nutshell, people perform meaningful work when they contribute to a greater purpose and social benefit (Steger et al., 2013).

Another way to understand the meaning of work in individuals is by understanding the fundamental values and their associated work. The individuals might view work as an opportunity to get a status, security of a job or any other reward as it influences their decisions and evaluations (Abric, 2008). Individualism leads to providing an identity to the teacher. According to Castells (2007), the identities provide meaning for the stakeholders and the individual. It is created by the stakeholders and built throughout the process of work. In such a situation, a teacher's identity is only created if the dominant institution embodies it and develops their work's meaning based on that embodiment process. The identities are "strategically activated by contingencies, struggles and are permanently discovered and reconstructed in action" (Mendes, 2002). The identity helps build the individual work values and undergoes a continuous reconstruction process. It is also vital to understand the theory of fundamental individual values while studying work and its meaning based on four work values—*intrinsic, extrinsic, social, and prestige* (Ros et al., 1999). The work values define the work goals of the individual and their behaviour. The work values refer to what the individual wants out of his work. According to Ros et al. (1999), the orientation of an individual towards work indicates the ideas of the people and their priorities. Personal Development, pleasant climate, security and material are the main dimensions of work values and goals (Harding et al., 1986). Andersson (1992) discussed that the meaning of work in an individual's life, their goals of work, and the societal norms of their context defines their identity.

There have been minimal studies on the meaning and functions of work in the life of teachers. In the Pakistani context very, few have touched upon the topic. Therefore, this qualitative study focuses on the private sector secondary school teachers in Karachi, Pakistan and involves the description of the meaning of work by the teachers, why they continue the teaching profession, what is the function of work in their life and what changes can be made to make work-life more meaningful. It is based on the work of Demirkasimoglu (2015), which was developed by utilising the main work of Morse and Weiss (1955) and by the later works of England et al. (1995).

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A phenomenological research design was followed for this study as it focuses on describing the common factors of the participants and reduces the individual experiences into universal essence (Creswell & Poth, 2017). This was an essential aspect as the description consisted of what the participants experienced and how they experienced it (Giorgi, 1994). The experiences provided an insight into the perceptions, which helped the study explore the value and meaning of "work" in the lives of the teachers. The research design was appropriate to the study as the design provided an opportunity to explore the lived experiences of the individuals as phenomena.

Data Collection

The data was collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, which lasted for about 1 hour. The interview questions were adapted from Demirkasimoglu (2015) and were conducted at the

end of the year and before the winter vacations. By this time, the teachers had completed their session and were about to go for the vacations; thus, they were comfortable and had enough time to participate in the study. The interviews were recorded using a voice recorder transcribed by the first researcher and was then peer-reviewed. The transcribed interviews were provided to the respondents to check for data accuracy and member check.

Participants

The participants were selected using purposive sampling as it is a nonrandom probability sampling technique that doesn't require any theory or fixed number of participants ([Creswell & Poth, 2017](#)). It helped the researchers identify the participants using their knowledge and experience to determine what needed to be known and willing to provide the required information ([Lewis & Sheppard, 2006](#)). The total population of the study included all Pakistani teachers in various private schools. Unfortunately, there is no data on the total number of private school teachers; therefore, this study relied on the teachers at English medium private schools in a particular metropolitan city. The researchers identified 17 participants who volunteered to give the interviews. All of them were secondary school teachers serving in different private English medium schools in Pakistan. The number of participants was sufficient for the study as phenomenological research requires a sample of six to fifteen ([Creswell & Poth, 2017](#)). They taught different subjects, belonged to different age groups and had different years of experience. The difference in the teachers' demographic details was also purposive to provide the perceptions of different lived experiences. The participants were labeled from R1 to R17 to maintain anonymity and confidentiality. The Table 1 shows the demographic background of the participants.

Data Analysis

The interviews were analysed using narrative analysis. At first, the transcribed interviews were coded in two stages. The initial stage consisted of generating standard codes or factors. The second stage consisted of generating a more focused code which was then converted into significant themes to be interpreted by the researchers. The narrative analysis consisted of interpreting the participants' experiences to identify and give proper meaning to their everyday work ([Tsoukas & Hatch, 2001](#)).

Table 2 shows the transcribed interviews divided into four main aspects, which give meaning to work in a teacher's life. The four main aspects were the economic meaning of work, psychological meaning of work, changes that make work more meaningful and reasons why work loses its meaning.

The four aspects of meaningful work provided a more focused meaning to work and were then converted into a thematic map. The thematic map is provided in Table 1.

FINDINGS

Economic Meaning & Function of Work:

The first question from the participants was about the financial aspect where they were inquired would they continue working even if they saved or got enough money to lead a luxurious life. This was to investigate the economic aspect of how the teachers look at economic gains in regards to their profession. This was followed by an inquiry about why they continue in the same field.

Table 1.

Demographic Breakdown

Participants	Field of Teaching	Gender	Age	Seniority
R1	Islamiat	Male	45	16
R2	Maths	Female	35	10
R3	Computer	Male	38	12
R4	Physics	Male	50	20
R5	Chemistry	Male	47	15
R6	Maths	Female	26	3
R7	English	Female	28	3
R8	Science	Female	37	8
R9	Science	Female	26	4
R10	Maths	Female	27	3.5
R11	Music	Male	31	8
R12	Urdu	Female	42	8
R13	Maths	Female	30	6
R14	Science	Female	26	4
R15	Urdu	Female	33	7
R16	Computer	Male	30	3
R17	Islamiat	Male	37	5

Economic aspect is crucial for continuing work:

The majority of the males among the participants emphasized the economic function of the work; they did not look at the work only as a source of self-identity or satisfaction rather, it is an understood function served by their job. As explained by one of the male participants, "For me working has a lot of functions like the first of all it's necessary because we get money for our lives and of course we have to make our living standards better" (R5).

Economic aspect is not significant:

On the contrary, most of the females came up with responses that underrated the economic purpose of work, such as, "First of all I already do not need to work, or you can say that in our society females are not supposed to work when their spouse is earning handsome amount of money. I am from a well-off family, and I do not work for money, so for me, the answer is very easy. I will keep working even if I don't have to work for money" (R3). This vividly explains the contextual reasons behind the difference of opinion between the genders.

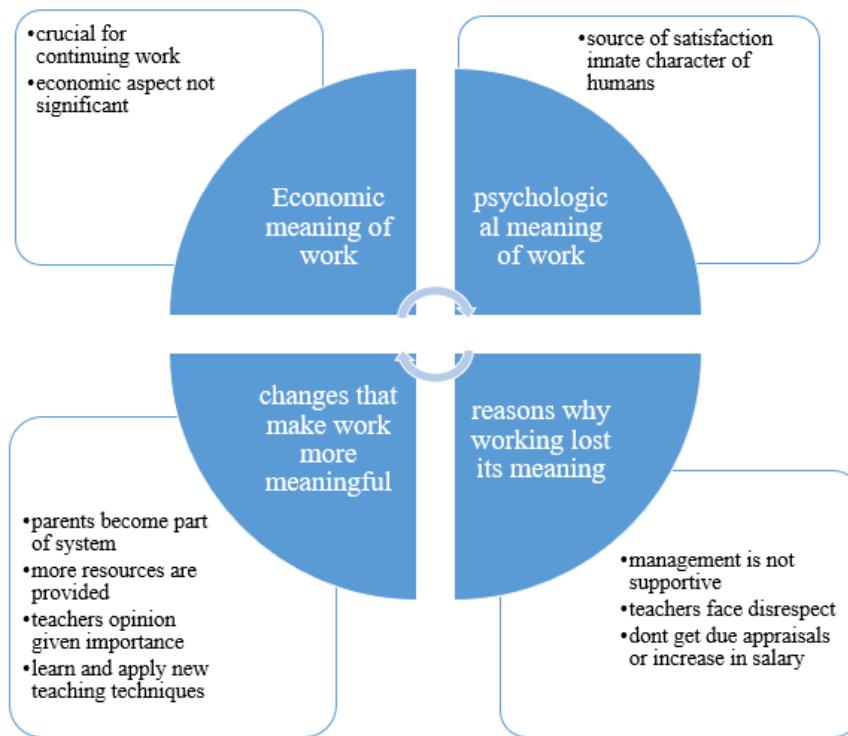


Figure 1: Thematic map meaning of work

Psychological Meaning and Function of Work:

Psychological meaning of work is the most commented facet of the study. The teachers both who confirmed and did not conform with the economic purpose of the work acknowledged the importance of psychological function served by their jobs. Teachers have spoken about the concept giving multiple reasons why they think it is mandatory for a human being to work even if he does not have any financial need.

Work is a source of satisfaction:

Most of the teachers thought that they would continue working in the same profession as teaching is their passion and it gives them self-satisfaction when they see their students are learning. As one of the teachers stated "... like I already said teaching is a profession in which you can impact the life of the others which gives you the leverage over the lives of the others, and I think it is a very good thing and that you can change the life of the others. No other profession in my life opinion has this kind of potential which the teaching has (sic)" (R7).

Work is an innate characteristic of humans:

A few of the teachers thought they would continue to work because it is natural for humans to work and suitable for their mental and physical health. They think it is quite unnatural for a human being to stay idle even if they have enough money to spend a luxurious life. As one of the participants replied, "... yes, actually the thing is most of my colleagues they are not needy. For me too. I am not needy that I have to work and fulfill my expenses. It is just that I am on it just to continue my

Table 2.

Initial coding by the researchers along with their respective respondents

Meaning and function of work	Economic meaning	Psychological meaning	Reason why work lost its meaning	Changes that can make work more meaningful	Respondent
Love sharing knowledge and learning	Independence in terms of finance	Independence and identity	Lack of appreciation personal issue interference	Teaching approaches and methodology	R1, R2, R3, R5, R9
Mental health	Yes, it has connections	Give us charm	Lack of resources and time management	Parent's contribution and teaching resources	R7, R5, R9, R17
Sharing knowledge, mental and physical health	No connection	Passion productivity and progress	Lack of appreciation	Parent's respect	R11, R7, R8, R16, R7, R9
Dream is promotion of teaching	Good earning	Relaxation and passion	Management not supportive	Teachers' opinion given importance	R3, R12, R15, R2, R5, R16, R17
Passion	Job satisfaction and salary	Innate human behavior and identity	Do not get due increment	Learn and apply new teaching techniques	R7, R4, R13, R1, R14
Passion and satisfaction	Financial factors	Source of satisfaction	Discriminatory behavior of management	More teaching resources provided	R2, R5, R18

passion (sic)" (R11).

Would continue working but in other profession:

Another significant opinion of the teachers was that they would continue working even if they were economically well off but not as teachers. As discussed by one of the interviewees, "I would certainly not like the same job. Teaching is not an easy job I feel stressed out when I teach. So, I would certainly not continue this (sic)" (R1). A few teachers mention the stress factor in teaching as a reason for not continuing it.

Work Loses its Meanings:

Another purpose of the study was to evaluate as to when teachers feel lesser affiliation with work or are discouraged. The question was to get an idea about the different situations where working

does not have the same significance in any teacher's life. This does not give an idea only about the reasons of what can cause the teachers to lose enthusiasm but it does also reflect upon their insight about what might be subconsciously a reason of their motivation on the other hand.

When management is not supportive:

Many teachers in an answer to this question expressed their concerns about the school management which according to them is authoritative, thus it does not only hamper staff's creativity but their decreases their energy as well. As expressed by one of the teachers, "The management is all the time on our heads, and we have to face the pressure from the parents and the kids as well. The students are becoming more rowdy and undisciplined and the school management is not concerned with that...(sic)(R9)" Similarly, another teacher highlighted the issue with a little different view, "There is one more thing when I feel my work is not getting recognised properly" (R12).

When teachers face disrespect:

Few teachers when asked about would they continue working if they by chance received a handsome amount of money for living, replied they would never opt for teaching in that case and the reason being that teaching is not a respectable profession any more. This can be explained in the light of the following words by a teacher, "Well of course I will join a profession which has certain value to it. You can say some prestige associated with it as I would already have enough money for my living so I will go for a reputable job with some value in the society and my family will also of course benefit from that" (R2). The statement affirms the social placement of teaching as a profession in the society.

Another aspect of the same theme is the disrespect of teachers by students or parents which makes them feel uninterested in their work. As explained be the respondent in following words, "Parents and the students think that they are paying money to the school so it means we don't have any value.... we are like their servants. Sometimes I don't feel like teaching them as it gives me a feeling that I am their servant and working for them on their payroll" (R10).

When teachers don't get due appraisals/increase in the salary:

One of the reasons given by teachers is the low pay scale or the injustice in the increments they receive annually. As quoted by a teacher, "First of all increase the salary the main reason I think many newcomers leave the job that is because they do not find it attractive, very so much pressure and so less money and no appraisals (sic)" (R15).

Work would become more Meaningful:

The last question asked from the participants was about the changes that they think can make their work life more meaningful. Majority of teachers came up with different answers where they explained that there are number of changes which can make their working lives more consequential.

If parents become part of the system:

This factor is emphasised by a very big portion of participants who say that parents should somehow be made the part of school system and they should know about the hard work and input of teachers for their children as said by one of the teachers, "...so that is what I felt like there must be workshops for parents" (R8) or "we don't connect with them but we need to make them realise that they do not own the teachers" (R4). Likewise, many other teachers highlighted the distance between the institution and the parents which if reduced can give more meaning to their work.

If more resources are provided:

Few teachers think that it would make their work-life more exciting if they can avail more resources as can be observed in the following response by a music teacher, "Umm...see when you visit a music room you see proper music instruments arrangements, a soundproof room, a complete music environment that even a small kid can tell that it's a music room" (R6). Similarly, another said, "Right now over here still we are working on it. We are provisioning towards the facilities and still if there is not any availability on any facility it makes me upset" (R13)

If we learn & apply new teaching techniques:

Some of the responses to the question gathered reviews about the application of new teaching methodologies such as, ".....because the pattern is repeated and for Urdu, it's the same according to me. I say they should be taught a little bit more different...(sic)(R14)" Another teacher said, "changes...umm like we are working on Cambridge system so that's obvious when I came here I saw that students are more interested in activity-based learning so we can bring more activities to make it exciting for students" (R7).

If teachers' opinion is given importance:

Many teachers stressed upon the fact that they have no say or, in other words, their work would become more meaningful if their opinion would be given due importance as a teacher stated, "...and last I would like to say that teachers should have a more say in the policies. When it comes to the policies related to the school administration, discipline, new admissions and other stuff which goes around in the school, the teachers should have a more say in that because they are the main stakeholders" (R12).

The above-quoted responses indicate that teachers will work more efficiently if they receive acknowledgment, appreciation and support. Furthermore, they look forward to having a resourceful environment.

DISCUSSION

Almost all of the participants in the study affirmed that they would continue working even if they possessed enough money for their living. However, many said they would like to switch to some other more respectable profession. The teachers wanted to continue teaching only because of the love and care for their students, similar to the study by [Hargreaves et al. \(2007\)](#), who observed that teaching is an exciting profession as it gives one a chance to influence others' life. On the contrary, some teachers in the current study thought that they would not continue teaching because of the low payrolls thus, it makes the profession unsatisfactory ([Kuusisto & Tirri, 2021](#)).

The stated finding is again consistent with the study conducted by [Hargreaves et al. \(2007\)](#). The perception of meaningful work has positive associations with happiness ([Wingerden & Stoep, 2017](#)), psychological well-being, work engagement and job satisfaction ([Johnson & Jiang, 2017](#)).

[Morse and Weiss \(1955\)](#) stated that one of the main reasons to continue working in the same field or organisation might be the money, whereas the desire or want to work might not be the same. It was also reflected in the current study where many teachers claimed that they would not continue teaching but would do some job which would be more respectable or prestigious in the society. This finding is similar to [Pignault and Houssemann \(2021\)](#) study, which stated remuneration as one of the significant factors behind work. Moreover, a few male participants said that it would be suitable for them and their families if they opt for some other esteemed job. In their research, [Quintanilla and Wilpert \(1991\)](#) discovered that people in working-class professions wish for more honourable and unrestricted jobs. Thus, middle-class respondents aspire for revered occupations. Similarly, [Minkkinen et al. \(2020\)](#) found that meaningful work is the key for professionals to continue working. Meaningful work is also associated with overall life satisfaction ([Hu & Hirsh, 2017](#)), indicating that meaningfulness in work also impacts other domains of work.

Psychological functions of work that highlight the sense of achievement and being involved in some productive or meaningful activity are the significant sub-themes quoted by the participants. However, some participants consider teaching as a stressful profession, yet many acknowledge the role of work in providing a sense of accomplishment to them. Similarly, many teachers affirm that being involved in some productive work is a healthy source of their mental well-being. This finding is analogous to [Demirkasimoglu \(2015\)](#). This is quite contrary that any stressful work with low social stature in society (according to some) can be a source of satisfaction. Analysing together, the meaning of work is multidimensional or can be stated as enigmatic.

Another exciting discovery is the similarity between [Tummers and Knies \(2013\)](#) and the current study. The participants in both cases declare the uncooperative behaviour of management to be responsible for their demotivation. Teachers think they should be considered and welcomed in policy making and all significant decisions related to the institution.

The majority of the teachers in the current study complained about the deterioration of teaching's image and teaching as a profession in the prevailing society. This indicated that consideration of teachers' opinion, policies, increase in their payrolls and enhancement in resources (as mentioned by some participants in answer to the question of significant changes) would not only be a source of teachers' betterment but would also help in elevation of the deteriorated status of the profession as [Demirkasimoglu \(2015\)](#) elaborated that majority of the participants claimed that the status of teachers has depreciated due to the changes in the education system which are shaped by the educational policies which in return gives the teachers, a feeling of uncertainty.

CONCLUSION

The study indicates some crucial findings related to the work-life realities of teachers who perceive work as a noble progressive work. Yet, they encounter demotivation from school management, parents and sometimes children. Nevertheless, most teachers confirmed that they would continue working in the educational set-up even if it is not teaching. Although another significant finding was that most participants regarded teaching as meaningful, productive and progressive work, they feel that they are not paid due respect ([Wingerden & Stoep, 2017](#)). The situation is further declining concerning the image of teaching in society.

Furthermore, teachers think their work can become more exciting if they are appreciated, and their monetary gains are considered. It is found that teachers would work more enthusiastically if their opinions were given importance. Thus, work's economic, psychological, and social aspects have multidimensional structures (Teurlings, 2008). It is recommended that a more comprehensive and longitudinal study should be conducted to understand the meaning of work for Pakistani teachers. The findings also imply that the management of the schools should provide a respectful environment to the teachers and work on the image building of the teachers in the society. It is also suggested that the school's policy should also be reviewed, and proper reflective practices should be encouraged so that the administration can give due acknowledgment to these hardworking teachers. This study can be utilised to collect further data relevant to the discussed domain, enabling identifying more crucial flaws in the education system in the Pakistani context. The study also directs towards the importance of teacher's image building and conducive work environment; thus, a follow-up study should be conducted to understand the school environment and develop strategies to enhance the quality of teaching and learning in Pakistani schools.

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